

**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

By

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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Melanie Mortimore", is written over a horizontal line.

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## I: Abstract

When approaching design, it is important to have a complete understanding of the world of the play. The only way to have a true understanding of the play is to have a multifaceted approach to the initial stages of design. Unfortunately navigating the vast information resources and synthesizing a design can be a harrowing task. In this essay I will use my own experiences with the design process to approach a manual that attempts to provide a cursory road map to approaching a design for two very different genres of theatre. The reason I chose these two specific productions is because I believe they show how a specific approach can be tailored to work with two different productions. By doing this I hope young designers will have at least a basic understanding of how to approach synthesizing a cohesive design.

## II: Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Melanie Mortimore for advising me through this thesis project. Her guidance through this process is only a small portion of guidance and support that she has provided me throughout my college career.

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### III: WRENS

#### i: Synopsis of the Play

*WRENS* takes place in the 1940s and centers on seven women who live together and serve in the WRNS, which stands for the Women's Royal Naval Service. Stylistically the play is realistic, and focuses on the various walks of life that have all been brought together through these characters on a military base in England during World War II. The play opens on an evening in the barracks much like any other evening. Jenny and Gwyneth are sitting around poking fun at Dawn's naivety. Dawn it seems is in a rather foul humor, something that is commented on by Gwyneth. Cynthia and Doris soon return, and the conversation turns to the general atmosphere of the barracks in the light of the impending end of the war. The next day Dawn continues to be out of sorts, and reveals to Gwyneth and Jenny that she is pregnant, something that almost certainly guarantees expulsion from the WRNS, especially since she is not currently married. When Dawn reveals the pregnancy was the result of being raped, the initial tones of condemnation changes as the women in the barracks determine how to move forward. If Dawn is discovered to be pregnant, and they did not report it, they too could get a citation or discharged. If they report the rape Dawn will be discharged from the service, and be forced to face the humiliation of being an unwed mother. At the end of act one Chelsea admits to Dawn that she also has an unwanted pregnancy and offers Dawn a way to avoid the drama of carrying the child to term. Dawn decides that the best thing to do is to go with Chelsea, and abort the pregnancy.

Act two focuses on the women after returning from their evening in town, only to discover that Dawn is missing. Meg returns to the barracks asking where Chelsea and Dawn were going together earlier that evening, which sparks the women discussing the possibility of

Dawn going with Chelsea to have an abortion. As the girls continue their discussion Dawn slowly reenters the barracks apparently suffering from complications from the procedure. Dawn has developed a fever as a result of an infection caused by the abortion. The other girls decide to help Dawn combat her infection, and throughout the process they decide that for better or worse they will help to hide Dawn's current affliction. The night guard comes to do the curfew check in and Gwyneth lies to her, saying that all seven of them have returned to the barracks on time, even though Chelsea never returned. At this point, Dawn's fever has subsided, and the women settle down to sleep; however, not long after there is another knock at the door. After talking with the night watch once again, Gwyneth reveals that in the morning they are all to report to the head of the barracks, as Chelsea had finally returned to the base but was in the compounds hospital due to serious complications from her own abortion.



## ii: The World of the Play

Having a deep and fully realized understanding of the world of the play, its plot, and its characters is vital to having a deep and meaningful design, and to creating a believable and relatable world. It is the single most fundamental portion of the design process, and can also be the easiest for young designers to overlook. Simply throwing clothes on characters and throwing them together on stage is not enough, nor is choosing something simply because you (as the designer) like it. Doing so can easily lead to a design that is shallow and feels incomplete for you. Hindsight is twenty- twenty as they say, and quite often there will be a moment, when in retrospect, a brilliant idea will dawn on you.

A show like *WRENS* is a deceptively difficult play to analyze, and then design. The style of the show can lull a designer into what is essentially a design trance, where there is a belief – a wrong one, mind you – that a majority of the work is already done due to its historical and realistic nature. This initial idea can create a difficult situation for the designer, and the staff working on the costumes if it is allowed to continue unabated.

*WRENS* is a slice of life play. Stylistically, it draws heavily upon the influences of Henrik Ibsen, a pioneer of the realistic style. It is interesting to note that *WRENS* further draws on Ibsen due to the nature of the circumstances of this particular slice of life. It is not a slice of an everyday mundane existence, but a portion that contains within it some truly harrowing events. These events could have occurred in the lives of its characters, but it would most assuredly not have been the most commonplace occurrence within the majority of society at the time. In this manner *WRENS* does truly follow Ibsen, whose realism often involves a pivotal moment in these characters lives. For its part, *WRENS* does a very good job at maintaining realism, even considering the circumstances.

*WRENS* takes place in the 1940s, near the end of World War II. All seven of the play's female characters are members of the WRENS or WRNS, the Women's Royal (English) Naval Service. While not permitted on battle lines during the war the WRNS were a section of the navy that handled communications, made armaments, and otherwise handled the various administrative, secretarial, and logistic ends of the navy. The idea behind this was to free up men for service in the front lines. Accordingly, this is an all-female cast, taking place entirely in one of the WRNS barracks.

All seven women live together in a one room barracks. These women come from various walks of life, and have varied moral codes associated with that life. Due to the war they have been unceremoniously brought together, and forced to cohabitate. Among this group are women of varied economic backgrounds. Two women come from families with money, three from a middle class background, and two are from an impoverished background. Each of these women are also dealing with the war in relation to their own situations, and the eventual ramifications of it in their own ways. Every single one of them asks themselves multiple times: how is my life going to change after the war?

What has begun to develop from only a cursory reading of the play, and maybe a bit of research regarding what exactly the WRNS were, is a base knowledge of what will factor into the eventual design. It has provided some really interesting bits of knowledge, knowledge that will be integral to the future analysis and understanding of the play, and then how we approach the final design of the production. First, we now understand that the production is an attempt at realism. The costumes will not have the theatricality that there could be in another production, something that can be hard to accept as a designer, since we generally appreciate theatricality; however, it is important to curb your design aesthetic to the intent of the play, and not to merely

design on a whim. We also now know that these women are in a military unit, and that has further implications for the design. Most importantly is the understanding that as a military unit a majority of the costumes they will be wearing must be dictated by the pervading uniform and military rules appropriate to the time, circumstances, and place of the action. This seemingly takes away much of the design freedom; after all, if they are wearing items dictated by military standards what is there to “design”. This, however, is not the case. While most of what these women wear is a uniform dictated by historical fact this does not mean that there is no room for design. In the case of *WRENS*, the action of the script allows various opportunities to consider what these women have brought from home, and what jewelry or possessions proved too valuable for them to leave behind.

One of the ways *WRENS* offers a unique ability to showcase the individuality of its characters is that at one point each character wears sleeping garments. In our production, it was determined that these were garments they brought from home before the war. So, they alone have the unique ability to showcase the economic status and personal taste of the characters, something that is otherwise hard to do on a large scale, due to the military uniforms. Differentiating the economic background is another thing that will be important to factor into a successful costume design. England was still a highly hierarchical place during World War II and there would be vast differences in the way a member of the upper class dressed compared to the lower classes, and vice versa, therefore economic background is another factor that will be important to a creating a successful costume design. These distinctions would not only have been evident in the type of clothing worn during the day, but also would have carried over into the sleeping garments individuals would have worn.

There is a final factor we now have that impacts the costume choices: an understanding of the circumstances that brought these women into the service, and an understanding of how they feel life will change after the war. It is something that may not seem important, however, consider how mood and self-image alter daily appearance, and how those factors could alter the daily appearance for someone else. If a character is, for example, from a more impoverished background compared to another character, she may not place a premium on keeping her hairstyle as current, or she may not take as much time to appear polished in her uniform. The reason is simply because for her (or him) those cosmetic things have little or no meaning. If daily life is pay check to pay check, then having a hairstyle that is in vogue becomes less important. This is also true of the type of clothing they wear. A uniform may fit differently if the characters wearing it does or does not have access to a tailor, compared to a character, in the opposite situation; untailored clothing could fit more loosely or irregularly, and he or she would pay it no mind.

This information may seem arbitrary to have, and unimportant to the final design at hand; however, understanding the circumstances of your characters and how they relate to the world they find themselves in currently is one of the basics of a successful design. Above we have highlighted some things that dictate our design. We have created for ourselves parameters into which our eventual design outcome must fit. In some ways we have begun to understand individual design needs, and maybe begun to analyze characters, something that is invaluable to creating a design, but what we have done here is only the beginning. These are the barest of bones in a design, to create a truly successful design one must delve deeper, and begin to analyze individually the characters in the play. By doing this, we create for ourselves a more complete

image of the characters we are working with, and can better make the choices required to successfully design for each of them.

### iii: Character Analysis

The next step in creating a truly comprehensive design is to do individual character analysis. In a show like *WRENS* this analysis will have a great effect on the final result of the design. Since it is a realistic play, analysis of individual character's economic backgrounds and current circumstances will play heavily into how they present themselves, and therefore the individual design for them. To understand this we are going to look individually at the characters in *WRENS* and then discuss how these characters develop throughout the play with what we have ascertained about them.

The first character we are going to discuss is Gwyneth. The very basic information we are provided about Gwyneth is that she is middle class, Welsh and in her late twenties. At the opening of the play, Gwyneth quickly reveals herself as the "mother" of the barracks. She is also one of the oldest women in this particular barracks, and so that motherly trait makes sense to her character. One of the paradoxes of Gwyneth, however, is her traditional nature. As events unfold with Dawn it is clear how deeply traditional Gwyneth's thinking is, when she goes so far as to blame Dawn for getting raped. This can most likely be attributed to her being middle class, a sector of society often associated with a more conservative and traditional, yet sometimes naive nature, and it represents a complex-character that could realistically exist in our world. Another aspect of Gwyneth is her gradual disillusion with how things will be after the war. She is convinced that her husband has had affairs during the war, and she alludes to the idea that she may have, at the very least, entertained the notion as well. With the other characters she speaks most candidly about her doubts that life will simply "return to normal". In Gwyneth there is a relatively complex character that can be identified. She is simultaneously conservative and outspoken, and at times very traditional, but in some ways the war has disillusioned her to these

traditions. How do these circumstances affect her costume choices? It is possible that instead of wearing her wedding ring, since she enjoys the attention of men, she has placed it on her nightstand, or keeps it around her neck. She is not the wealthiest, and unlike some others in the cast, she has very little concern for upholding her image. Therefore, her uniform may not be well-kept. At the same time, she is very concerned with following the status quo and attempts to avoid making waves, so that limits how far she will neglect her uniform. Since we have to see her sleep attire, it could be somewhat matronly. She was married before she came and joined an all-female unit, so who would she have been attempting to impress when she packed her bag for her duties as a member of the WRNS?

Compared to Gwyneth, Jenny is quite different. She too is Welsh, though slightly younger than Gwyneth. In her twenties, Jenny is at her core very traditional. She is very concerned with propriety, and keeping herself in line with her traditions. On several instances throughout the play she comes off quite snobbish, reminding Doris that she does not know how to properly prepare the tea. Jenny, however, reveals that she has one of the most profound paradoxes of the characters in *WRENS*, when Dawn reveals her rape and the resulting pregnancy. Gwyneth reacts quite poorly and turns against Dawn somewhat, however, Jenny who has been portrayed as aloof and cold sides with Dawn, and provides for her more support than Gwyneth does. It is the single biggest paradox, because the character that appears to be the most focused on propriety, concerned with appearance, and accepting of the status quo sides with a woman who has, through circumstance and necessity thrown all of that to the wind. So how do we clothe Jenny? Considering the realistic nature of this production we must make choices that are historically appropriate, making it seemingly more difficult to costume her in a way that shows her true complexity, and yet her concern with upholding appearance is easy enough to denote in

subtle ways. As we mentioned, Jenny is a middle class woman like Gwyneth, but demonstrates more pride in her appearance. One way that this can be reflected is in a hairstyle that is simple but neat and harder to maintain, something that would indicate she takes time in her appearance. Her uniform could be better maintained, possibly better pressed than Gwyneth's, yet it is unlikely that it would be superbly tailored, since she still has little spending money. As for her sleeping attire, Jenny's might be made of a fabric similar to Gwyneth's nightgown; however, Jenny is not so disillusioned with marriage, so her sleeping attire could be less matronly

The third member of the middle class is Doris. Of the seven women in the barracks, Doris has been most affected by the calamities of the war. Her husband has been killed during the fighting, and it has completely shattered her hopes for the future. At one point, Cynthia is talking about getting an apartment after the war, and not returning home to her parents, to which Doris woefully admits that she herself will never have the independent funds to have her own flat. For Doris, the only option is to return to her parents, and live out her days as an old maid. She has lost everything she holds dear, so what she still has, she clings to heartily. The thing she seems to cling to the most is the tradition of tea, and she seems to obsess over it. In making design choices, one should focus on her depressed nature. While her character seems able to put on a brave face throughout most of the show, those few moments where we get to see her unguarded, we find she is truly tormented by the tragedies that have befallen her. So, with that in mind several choices are possible. Either she is truly barely holding on to her sanity, in which case her appearance should reflect her overwhelming inner turmoil, or the designer could interpret her design by deciding she has thrown herself completely into menial things to distract her from her depression. In the first possibility, her hairstyle should reflect the nature of her current state of mind. A simple style, something simply maintained would be the best in this



case, something that would allow her to pass as okay, but does not require much of her focus. Her uniform and nightgown should be nothing spectacular, again something that is passable of inspections, but with very little extra effort exerted. If the designer (and director) chose to interpret her desperation being controlled through distraction, she could meticulously style her hair, and press her clothing to near perfection, because the actions take her mind off of the calamities in her life, and serves as her defensive barrier.

The two youngest characters are Meg and Dawn. These two also happen to be the most naïve, and the poorest of the characters; however, aside from this, Meg and Dawn are very different people. Meg works in the WRNS stockroom, so she is separated much of the time both physically and socially from the others who work mainly as secretaries and communications officers. She is also an orphan, being raised among nuns, and as such, her general outlook on the WRNS and the war is different from the other girls. For her, joining the WRNS is freedom, and is the chance to meet and be courted by various men; a chance to experience a portion of life that was previously denied to her. Meg has a certain reckless nature when it comes to the rules and regulations in the WRNS, and is constantly returning home late and going off base to dances with the men stationed near the WRNS. Her wardrobe needs to reflect those different aspects of her personality, as well as her different status in the WRNS structure. Her nightgown is a hand-me-down from the nuns, so it is probably the most ill-fitting and the most matronly styled of the bunch and in her uniform, the nature of her work needs to be reflected. Most WRNS worked in navy blue wool skirts that hit just below the knee, however, in specific cases they could be issued a pair of trousers. In Meg's case, a pair of trousers could be a good way to distinguish her from the rest of the WRNS due to the nature of work she is assigned on the base.

Dawn on the other hand is very fragile. The audience never sees her prior to her rape, so we only ever witness a character coping with that experience. She is alluded to as the most childish of the bunch, and has a very strong connection to her parents. In the *WRNS* she actually works with many of the men in the mechanic's shop, and ultimately, this is where her boss rapes her. All of these things need to be reflected in her wardrobe, as best as possible. In the production I designed, she wore her overalls from the shop back to the barracks, rather than remove them in the shop as one usually would have done. Her sleep wear was also shorter than what would have been conventionally acceptable. The reasoning for me behind this choice was that her nightgown is one from her youth, one that she has had for a number of years, and so it has become short on her.

The final two characters in *WRENS* are Cynthia and Chelsea. These two are both members of the upper class, and they even went to the same school for a time. Cynthia is very similar to Jenny in the way she presents herself. Her demeanor is quite proper and very refined. She has little to no reason to challenge the existing status quo, since she is in the upper echelon, and therefore she stringently strives to uphold it. Cynthia takes this personality trait to the extreme in several ways. She refuses to drink tea with the other women, because tea is technically contraband, and as a communications officer, she will not discuss any information she comes across because it would be inappropriate to gossip about possibly secret information. Her appearance is likewise dictated by her self-imposed propriety. Her uniform should be well-fitted compared to the other characters, since she is a person concerned with appearance, and has the ability to spend money on the upkeep and maintenance of her wardrobe. She would have had the uniform tailored to fit her impeccably and her hair would also be well quaffed, and meticulously cared for. Cynthia's status would even be reflected in the style of her sleep wear.

Whereas the women of lower classes would have simpler sleep wear, Cynthia could have a nice matching robe and nightgown set. Her actual nightgown would have some detailing to it that would separate her from the other women in the barracks. Her appearance should be more polished than the other WRNS, since it is something that she places a high value on.

Chelsea is the black sheep of the barracks, and is depicted as the slut of the group. Her character is not really developed through dialogue or action beyond that point, and her relationship with the other women in the barracks is tenuous at best. Her back story and motivations are largely a mystery to the audience. Cynthia actually provides what little information about her we have when she tells the other girls that she and Chelsea attended the same boarding school. Because of this, we know that the two have a similar economic background. Chelsea apparently did not inherit Cynthia's need to follow the status quo, something that is apparent by the way others refer to her. Doris mentions that she admires how Chelsea never seems to care what people think of her. At one point, Meg attempts to smoke a cigarette in the same manner as Chelsea, trying to emulate the sex appeal she exudes. It is also revealed that Chelsea is pregnant when she offers to take Dawn with her to get an abortion. When creating a costume plot for Chelsea, the designer has to consider her character very carefully. Of all the women in the barracks, Chelsea is the most comfortable with her body and her sexuality. She harbors little of the modesty the other women do. As such, designing for her is a slightly different task. Her nightgown need not be as modest as the other women's nightgowns. The fabric can hug her frame slightly more as well, creating a sensuous silhouette. Her uniform should also be well tailored; however, whereas Cynthia's is well tailored and modest, Chelsea's uniform is tailored a bit more sensually than Cynthia's uniform, indicative of the difference in their personalities.

The decisions cited above are just a small portion of some examples of the type of choices you will be faced with as a designer. When working on a show in the style of *WRENS*, this sort of dramaturgical work is extremely important. Who these characters are will have a great effect on how their clothing is designed and executed; an effect that will include not only the type of garment utilized, but even the fit of the garment. These distinctions help to create a fully rounded and actualized world that is viable to the audience who is watching. That is why it is very important for the designer to carefully analyze each and every character. The process is often a long and tedious one. For me, it often requires not only multiple readings of a script, but pages of scribbled notes, or random thoughts that relate both directly and indirectly to costume needs. Doing this, it is possible to create a world for each character; which is something that is so important for a show in the style of *WRENS*.

Another reason understanding the characters in *WRENS* is so important is because it allows the designer clarity in choice. If he or she has already narrowed what style of clothing might be appropriate, then the specific choices available are likewise narrowed, and can be further trimmed down with good, historically oriented research. Since *WRENS* is a historical drama, the emphasis of research is as important as the character analysis and so acquiring and then understanding a vast amount of directed research is another important task of the designer. With a play like *The Rover* which takes place in the 1660s there is a certain amount of creative freedom with the historical detailing. Since the modern audience is so removed from specific historical details associated with the period of *The Rover*, so attention to those details often proves of less importance, and therefore a designer can get away with a loose interpretation of the period. The time period in *WRENS* is still familiar and relevant to much of its audience, so

this makes it imperative that the designer strives to pay as much attention to historical detailing as possible.

#### iv: Gathering Research

Researching for *WRENS* was an interesting process, and very different from researching for many other types of productions. It is important in *WRENS* to have good quality research, rather than focusing on the quantity of research. This stems from one key factor, as a historical piece, there is a load of information out there on the internet that is just unreliable. People will constantly tag items as being from a time period that they are not actually from, so having an overwhelming amount of unfounded research can actually be more of a hindrance than a help. This is especially true considering the nature of the costumes in *WRENS*. Most of the time the characters are in their military uniforms, and several good images of these uniforms will be infinitely more helpful than hundreds of poor images.

During the process of *WRENS* I did not tailor my research as well as I might have. In the end, I had a wide array of images, but was paying little attention to the cohesiveness of them. I eventually decided upon a preliminary costume design that included the basic uniforms the WRNS were issued, and then a khaki uniform for Meg who worked in the stock room, and therefore was less formal than the women who worked in different areas of the compound as communication officers, secretaries, and drivers. I did have evidence to support the choice in my research, and my director loved the option, as it added a little more contrast on the stage. As I continued to move forward, gathering more directed research and solidifying some of the minute design choices, I ceased to have any images of the WRNS in a khaki uniform. This concerned me, and I began to dig specifically for WRNS in the khaki uniform. What I uncovered was that I had made a relatively severe error. The instances of the WRNS in khaki were not proper for this production. Those uniforms were issued to WRNS stationed in the warmer areas like the South Pacific, or around Japan. This was because regulation wool uniforms issued to WRNS were

often too warm for this climate. I then had to approach the director and inform her that due to my continued research, we needed to change the costume since the show *WRENS* takes place on the British Isle and not anywhere near the South Pacific. It was not, in the end, a huge complication; however, as a designer it was something that was somewhat embarrassing for me personally, and it was something that could have been avoided with just a little more research prior to meeting with the director.

Thankfully the issue was caught prior to any performances, and was therefore not an instance where poor research led to offending an audience member. However, especially when it comes to shows where people are going to be depicted with military regalia people who are serving or have served in the armed forces take that time of service and the specifics of the uniform very seriously, and rightly so. For that reason it becomes very important to have very directed research. The uniform has to be spot on, down to the regalia worn by the characters. It would be very bad form, for example, to put a Nazi medal on a member of the WRNS simply because the designer felt the uniform needed to have a bit of metal or small insignia to complete the look, even if it was assumed the regalia would never be seen or recognized due to the staging or the distance of the character to the audience. If a veteran of World War II were to notice that, there would be no surer way to alienate them or make them question the intent of the choice. In *WRENS* this was also important because of the uniform differences mentioned above, but also due to organizations like the WRINS (Women's Royal Indian Navy Service) and the WRANS (Women's Royal Australian Navy Service). These two groups were modeled heavily on the WRNS, but the uniform and regalia differed slightly. In the initial research stages it is possible to overlook these relatively subtle differences, however, before meeting with the director to show preliminary design images and concepts it is both important and helpful to eliminate those

research images that no longer apply. Doing so would thus avoid a situation where a director falls in love with a garment that is ultimately inappropriate for the needs and situation of the play.



## IV: 42<sup>nd</sup> Street

### i: Synopsis of the Play

*42<sup>nd</sup> Street* is part of the classic lexicon of American musical theatre, and as such its actual story is a relatively simple one. A young country girl Peggy Sawyer moves to New York City in the hopes of making it big on Broadway. She is, naturally, a little naïve when acclimating herself to the culture of city life. Outside the theatre, Peggy is too nervous to enter and therefore misses her audition. The chorus girls and one of the playwrights invite the disheveled Peggy out to lunch and give her a taste of city life as a member of the chorus. The director of the show, Julian Marsh, is a bitter and burned out Broadway legend. When he stumbles upon Peggy dancing with the girls, he is convinced to hire her as a chorus member. Once she is a part of the chorus, Peggy manages to earn the wrath of Dorothy Brock, the show's diva. When Dorothy falls and hurts her ankle she names Peggy as the perpetrator and Peggy is subsequently fired from the show.

In act two the cast realizes that Dorothy's ankle is severely injured, and therefore, the show is going to have to close, unless they can find a lead to replace the injured star. The cast convinces Julian to chase Peggy down and invite her to rejoin the show as the female lead. During a hastened rehearsal process Julian falls for Peggy, and she for him. The second opening of the show, with Peggy Sawyer as the lead, is a giant hit. Peggy is immediately made aware that she is now a Broadway star. Julian and the other show sponsors throw her a party in celebration, but Peggy decides to go to the cast party hosted by the chorus members instead. As she exits the stage Peggy turns back and invites Julian to join her at the "kids" party, he accepts marking a turning point in both his relationship with Peggy, and his views on his life in the theatre.

## ii: Understanding the World of the Play

As important as understanding the world of *WRENS* was to the final design, so too is understanding the world of *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*. Though both set within 10 years of each other, the two shows could not be more opposed if you tried. Whereas *WRENS* is a stark, realistic portrayal of the lives of its female characters in 1940s England, *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* is in fact an idealistic view of life in New York during the early 1930s, when the world was in the depths of the Great Depression. Written in the 1970s, the musical stage version of *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* harkens to a nostalgic time that was far removed from the turbulent events of the 1970s. In this manner, *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* presents a very different world than that seen in *WRENS*. While historically based, it is bright and fun. It is not intended to be a depiction of everyday life. Instead, *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* is intended to provide hope through the depiction of the standard American Dream. This rags to riches story provides for the audience a fantastic escape from their own lives, complete with glitzy costumes and an overabundance of dance numbers. While this does give the designer a certain creative freedom that was inappropriate for much of *WRENS*, it does provide some very difficult issues that the designer must work around in order to be successful.

*42<sup>nd</sup> Street* is a musical, and this alone provides a plethora of challenges that the designer must consider when creating a cohesive design. In musicals there is often dancing. While this spectacle is great from an audience perspective, the type of costumes worn can affect the dance numbers in both positive and negative ways. The early 1930s was characterized by longer hem lines, and low waistlines on women's garments. While this silhouette is truly a lovely one, it does hinder a person's movement greatly. The dresses most often seen were relatively narrow through the hips, and this type of restriction can be very difficult for the dancer to work around. If a garment is too tight through the hip, the range of motion that is accessible to the dancer is

significantly decreased from what it would be in a dress that is gathered around the waist. The long hemlines can also prove potentially dangerous, not only because they provide the dancer with a tripping hazard, but also because it is possible to get a heel caught in the hemline of the dress and rip it out. In either case, the situation can prove hazardous for the dancer, and also damage the garment. In order to avoid these problems several steps can be taken by the design team, with the approval of the director. One is to restrict the motions in the dance so that the styles necessary from a true to period costumed show are no longer a severe hazard to the dancers involved. While this option is completely viable, chances are a director and choreographer are not going to accept it for this particular type of production. *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* has a very thin plot, and the only way it is capable of being well received is by dazzling the audience, and thus not giving them much time to delve into the weak story line. A restricted range of motion is not the most conducive to dazzling the audience.

The second option, and often the more likely one, is to push the limits of what the time period looks like. For the sake of this show, does it really need to be a true period design? Will the show be affected in any great way if what is created becomes not a true period, but rather something that has a period look? If the decision is made to strive for a period look rather than a historically correct piece, some liberties can be taken by the designer and shop staff to mitigate the issues associated with the original period. Some ways to alter period is to push them backwards or forwards in time accordingly. Once you push towards the 1940s, for example, the shape of the dress is different, and allows for a little more movement for the dancer. As we push into the 40's, the hemlines have shortened slightly, reducing one potential issue in a large dance musical. In some cases, however, pushing the period is not as acceptable for one reason or another. Instead, it may be better to play with the authenticity of the period by selecting pieces

that evoke many of the ideals and lines of the original period, without being true recreations or pieces of that period. In this production of *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* the method used was an odd combination of the two. We stretched slightly what was considered the period, to allow for some ease in movement, however, we did not push it so far as to exclude the details of the original period. By stretching the period a little we were able to select pieces that fit within the spectrum of what we considered our style; pieces that evoked the feel of what we wanted without being authentic. Often the low waist seam lines seen as a detail on many of the dresses and skirts in our research was raised to allow for more movement through the hips; however, it was combined with a tulip shaping that created a silhouette similar to what was seen in the same research. Thus, costumes were created that were not truly authentic, but still established a world that seemed authentic and well rounded.

One of the other issues associated with *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* is the vast array of worlds in the play. There are three distinct areas the play exists in. First there is the audition and rehearsal space where a majority of the action takes place. Alongside that world is the world outside the theatrical spaces. This is in the same realm as the audition and rehearsal space, however, instead of clothing representative of dance warm ups and rehearsals for the show, it consists of daywear that is associated with the period created. The final of the three worlds is that of *Pretty Lady*, *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*'s show within a show. While delineating the rehearsal and outside world from one another is often a matter of personal preference, creating the line between *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, or the “real world” and *Pretty Lady* can actually be quite difficult. This is mainly due to the fact that in the book there is often no clear delineation between the two of them, and no details as to what the storyline of the *Pretty Lady* production is. *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* jumps between these two worlds at random and without warning. As designers, the easiest way to delineate between the two worlds

was to simply consult with the director and choreographer when questions arose, and to draw upon past productions of the show to see how these lines have been drawn before. By using both of these methods we were better able to create a cohesive world that was able to stand on its own two feet, and that, in the end, was clearly defined.

### iii: Character Analysis

This area of the design process is also quite distinct from *WRENS* in many ways. While *WRENS* focused heavily on character analysis for each of its characters in its design process this was not the case with *42nd Street*. Unlike *WRENS*, *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* is driven forward by the actions of its protagonists, not the actions of all its characters. These protagonists may not be as complex as the protagonists in *WRENS*, and the reason for that stems from *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*'s genre. It is not a play that is meant to be highly thought provoking, so much as entertaining. So to say that the protagonists in it are archetypes may be rude, but it is also true. The protagonists have their own developmental differences and character arcs, however, it is easy to identify the traditional archetypal roles they are developed from. To support the protagonists there are several supporting characters that are hardly developed at all. They are the comic relief, or they provide the exposition needed to push specific actions forward. In addition to this, there is a large dance ensemble that is never individualized or fleshed out. This is a common consequence of the musical theatre genre.

Peggy Sawyer is *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*'s protagonist. She is a young girl just moved to New York City from Allentown, Pennsylvania. She is remarkably talented, and has a natural way about her that attracts others to her. She is also the quintessential naïve country girl that has been transposed into the life of the big city. As such, and despite her best efforts, she manages to make an enemy out of the one woman she should not have: Miss Dorothy Brock. As the stereotypical protagonist of the play, Peggy has a certain sweetness, but also needs to embody an alluring nature. At the top of the show her manner of dress should be indicative of her naïve nature. Her hair should not be the most stylish, but rather a simple style that shows she made

some effort without looking like she has access to, or an appreciation and understanding of, the latest trends.

Dorothy Brock is a stock diva character. She has had to fight her way into the positions she currently holds, and is all the stronger for it. She enters into a relationship with Abner Dillon in order to keep the lifestyle she has become accustomed to, consequently shunning her true love, and is all the more bitter for it. Along with her cold demeanor, Dorothy has lived the life of a theatrical star for years, and as such has become somewhat entitled and yet embittered towards a life in the theatre. She no longer has any mirth for her job, and it shows. She has almost unlimited access to any clothing and jewelry her heart desires, especially since beginning her relationship with Abner. Her style should reflect the hedonistic nature of her profession. As a character, Dorothy should have a very stylish wardrobe, with a touch of special detailing to really set her apart from the crowd.

Julian Marsh is the director of *Pretty Lady*, and the eventual love interest of Peggy Sawyer. He is a stern man, hardened by years in a theatre that has been a series of ups and downs. Once regarded as the top director on Broadway, he is currently struggling to find the funding to mount one more show. His life of turmoil in the theatre has left him cold and unfeeling towards his bright eyed cast. He does however, see something in Peggy that sparks a certain amount of joy, and this is something he has not felt for a long time. Julian is a businessman who has been battle hardened by a turbulent life in the theatre, and his demeanor and dress should reflect that state of being. He does not need to dress as brightly or as warmly as the other characters. That form of showmanship does not come to him naturally, and his choices in life are now ruled much more by the business component in show business, rather the “show” of show business.

These protagonists are the most developed of the characters in *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, and their analysis is the same type as the *WRENS* characters; however, many of the supporting characters are not developed nearly to this extent. For example, Abner Dillon, who is Dorothy's lover and sugar daddy, is hardly developed beyond that point. The information we have on Abner is rather sparse. We know that he has an extremely successful Kitty Car business, one that has endowed him with a good amount of wealth – at least enough to fund the show and land him Dorothy Brock's affections. It is also revealed throughout the show that he is relatively possessive and prone to jealousy in regards to Dorothy, something that factors into the development of the show he is producing. That is all the information that we have on Abner, he is not a deeply developed character, nor does he need to be. Along with Abner there are a host of other characters who are not developed beyond the skeleton of a person. Characters like "Anytime" Annie, who is one of the lead chorus dancers, and a friend to Peggy. As her name suggests, she may be a tad loose with the men in the show, although that is never verified outright during the production. She also has the traits stereotypically endowed to the female protagonist's closest friend. Annie is simultaneously feisty, independent, and hard working; however, in her relationship with Peggy she is also very loyal and supportive.

These characters are important to the design and ultimately to the show, however, designing for them presents an interesting challenge. These characters are seen enough to have a specific personality, therefore, they need to have clothing that in some way reflects their individual personality developed by the actor and director. To do this, there needs to be conversation between the designer, the director, and even the actor. Having this conversation will ensure that the visions of the designer, the director, and the actor all coincide. During *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* there was a moment when such a conversation was vitally important. The initial concept I



brought to the director for Abner Dillon, was not in line with what the director and actor had envisioned, therefore certain details had to be tweaked to create a design that allowed for a synthesis of the design and the actor choices to create a character that feels well-rounded and natural.

These are examples of character analysis for *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, and about how in depth a designer can go for any of the individual characters. It is a consequence of the genre to which this form of musical belongs. Many musicals draw heavily on stock characters and plot motivations. This makes it easier for actors and actresses to focus more on the external actions of their characters and less on the internal motivations that drive them. Thus the audience need not be bogged down by complex plot or extensive character development. Instead, the audience is free to sit back, relax, and enjoy the show. Deep character development actually becomes counter intuitive to this process, and only works to overcomplicate the simple beauty of this type of production.

Another reality of musicals in general is the fact that the number of characters is usually in the double digits. So creating an individualized character analysis for every single character is virtually impossible, or at the very least, highly impractical. A great way to handle these types of characters is to treat them, as much as possible, as one entity. What motivates this particular group of people, what are their collective goals? Why are they here? What is the motivation behind them? For *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* this was actually a really informative process. The characters in *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* are all actors living in New York City, during the Great Depression. It is enough of a challenge for a performer to make a solid living during the best of economic times, so it is hard to imagine how difficult it would have been for an actor during such an economic crisis to make a living wage. This Julian Marsh show allows them to do what they love, and get paid for the

next eight or so weeks, and in a time when virtually everyone lived paycheck to paycheck and having a steady income was rare. Every choice that they make is, driven by their need to survive and provide for themselves the next day, as well as their passion for the business. From the way they dress themselves and style their hair to the way they perform, the design should reflect how much they want to be where they are.

The character analysis in *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* is different than that in *WRENS*, mainly due to the genre of theatre being produced. *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*'s character analysis is indicative of the show's emphasis. Whereas *WRENS* is largely focused on the interpersonal relationships of the seven women, *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*'s focus is on creating a story of hope and providing an escape for the audience. Due to that the analysis has to focus more on how to create the world, rather than the small details that make a character unique. However, designing for *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* has its own obstacles to surmount, most of which appear when gathering research.

Gathering the research to design *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* was probably one of the most challenging parts to this design. This is due in part to the vast amount of research required to create a living, realistic world for so many characters with little character development. Whereas in a production like *WRENS* the designer could complete their design with well-directed research, that is simply not the case with *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*. The number of characters in the world along with the variety of costumes needed require a substantial amount of knowledge about the world as a whole. For a production like *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* specifically, dividing your research into several different sections is a great way to organize your initial findings.

The first section of your research on the contextual time period of the show is generally going to end up being your largest and most encompassing part. The goal is to create a general base knowledge of what you would like your production to look like. There are a myriad of sources from which you can gather your information to create a powerful impression of the period you are going for. One of the fastest ways to gather this information is through the use of the internet. Though sometimes not the most reliable source, as mentioned earlier, the internet can be a very useful source when researching a show like *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* as opposed to a show like *WRENS*. This is due largely to the structure of the productions. The design for *WRENS* focuses more on specific details that can often be more easily verified through physical text resources rather than on the internet, where such specific information can be unreliable. On a show like *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, however, where the design will be allowed to waver from strict historical details to compensate for the genre, the vast amounts of research showing general style lines, color, and texture can be utilized to develop the design concept and choreographed needs of the show.

In *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* this section of research can actually be further divided into several subcategories that include every day wear, evening wear, rehearsal attire, theatrical costumes, and outer wear. All of these different categories are needed in *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, and by dividing the research into these separate sections, the designer has created a well-organized reference that can help to ease the amount of time needed to find research to support a specific design choice.

The next section of research that could be very useful for a production similar to *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* is research on the previous productions that have been done. This is most helpful when attempting to determine which songs live in which world. *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* is a situation where there is a show within a show and its script is lacking in developmental details, therefore establishing the separate worlds is vital to a successful production. Since someone established this beforehand, their choices can be really useful when attempting to establish your own world lines, especially if you are unfamiliar with the show. The actual book for *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* is also decidedly ambivalent about where what scenes fall, and therefore without some previous familiarity, it is virtually impossible to determine which scenes fall into each world. It must therefore become a conversation between the designer, director, choreographer, and even the actors, easily aided by research on previous productions. This knowledge allows all of the artistic parties to make an educated decision about where the lines lie, then they can decide whether to follow precedent or to make a choice that is counter to what has been done in the past.

The final section of research that can be very valuable when putting together a production of this nature is research on the original source material, be that a book, a screenplay, or a musical. Since originally *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* was a movie, researching the movie could provide further insight into what creates a comprehensive world for the production. In *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* there is a musical number “We’re in the Money”, that appears in both the original screenplay as well as the

stage musical. The choices made for that production number for our production reflected more of a feeling established in the original movie, rather than the original stage show. The original production of “We’re in the Money” has an element of burlesque style to it that is often lost in the musical version, where the costumes tend to lean more towards the campy side of design rather than sensuality. This choice is neither good nor bad, they are merely two halves of the same coin, and both are completely valid choices. It is up to the designer and director to decide which is right for a particular production.

There is one more aspect associated with the research process of a production like *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, although it does not require you to have your head in a book. Instead, this is where you begin to put the actual worlds together. While this portion of the design process is largely trial and error, and involves a certain process of discovery, I have chosen to include it under research. This is truly one of the most harrowing portions of the design process, and can be an overwhelming experience. In *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* this involved grouping the multiple choices we had together, and then creating a loosely coordinated color pallet that delineated the specific worlds within the show. As I mentioned previously, there are three specific worlds in *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, and it is the job of the designer to differentiate between them. These worlds do not necessarily need to be separated by color, but manipulating color is an easy way to help denote them. For the outside world, the choice became to have those colors be richer, and a little darker. This does not mean, however, that we stuck to dark colors, merely more saturated tones that created a richer pallet. The rehearsal attire became a separate world that was noted by its bright and vibrant tones. While the difference between these two worlds was not extremely obvious, it did help to create a slight separation between the two and solidify for the audience a different environment. In both of those worlds, however, it is important to note that there was a concerted

effort to avoid the appearance of “costumes”. As a designer the goal was to create a world that seemed believable yet cohesive, which is something that cannot be done through arbitrary choices. A surprising amount of effort goes into having an effortless appearance, and an effortless appearance is important if the eventual goal is to create a believable rather than a theatrically “costume-y” look. In the third world, the world of *Pretty Lady*, there was room to have some fun with this more theatrical feel since the third world is the show *Pretty Lady* set within the “reality” of *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*. Eventually the costumes chosen for the *Pretty Lady* numbers in our production were mostly pastel colors and were specifically styled to appear as costumes. This helped establish a true separation between *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* and *Pretty Lady*.

## V: Conclusion

The process of creating a costume design for theatre is multifaceted and can prove to be a harrowing task for young designers. Often the complex nature associated with creating a fully realized design eludes those first attempting to do so. By utilizing a tailored approach to research and analysis it is possible to navigate the complicated process that is creating a costume design. It is my goal that by examining the design process for the two productions listed above a young designer may be better able to approach this process. By utilizing the examples above, I have created a guide to designing for two very different styles of theatrical production. These similar, yet divergent methods to approaching design could be easily tailored to fit a plethora of theatrical productions and thus create a truly customized approach to the design process.

## VI: Works Cited

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